

How far are we justified in treating 'religion'

as a valid area of academic study?

Introduction

From early evolutionary theories through to modern-day de-constructionism (Pals, 2006), the study of *religion* within academia has been a topic of debate across disciplines. In order to tackle the question posed, that is, the extent to which we are justified in treating 'religion' as a valid area of academic study, it was deemed necessary to first explore what is meant by the term *religion*. Using scholarship from the fields of anthropology, history and religious studies, this essay commences with an attempt to define the notion of *religion* and explore the term's trajectory in terms of its meaning from doctrinal origins through to experiential and secular interpretations. The essay then proceeds to examine the ideas of Timothy Fitzgerald (2000), Russell T. McCutcheon (2003) and James Cox (2006) with the aim of demonstrating how the notion of *religion* is hard to pin down and that, as such, the question of its validity as an academic subject requires a multi-layered response. In the end, this essay raises the question of semantics and ultimately concurs with Fitzgerald's view that *religion* as an area of scholarship necessitates a reflexive methodology in order to retain credibility.

Categories and Concepts

In an attempt to understand the meaning of the term *religion*, an investigation into its etymological roots reveals a connection with the term *obligation* via the Latin verb *ligāre*: to 'bind' (Onions, 1966: 754). The idea of being obligated, or bound, relates in turn to the idea of a supernatural transcendent deity. This particular notion of *religiosity* has arguably been the focus of meaning-making studies from a variety of perspectives (Fitzgerald, 2000). Whilst early scholars 'were inspired to search for the origins of religion' (Olsen, 2006: 264), later theorists were as much concerned with its 'psychological, sociological and economic functions' (Segal, 2000: 193). The common denominator, however, is the scholars' ethnocentric stance. Anthropologist

Fiona Bowie has argued that *religion* is a constructed category 'based upon European languages and cultures' and that such a category is not found in other parts of the world (2006: 19). As both a "lapsed" believer and anthropology graduate, the idea of *religion* as a socially-constructed category is personally edifying. My own views concur with Fitzgerald's argument that the category of *religion* would better fit cultural studies as it does not of itself offer anything above and beyond established human sciences. Furthermore, Fitzgerald has argued that the construction of this category is 'part of a historical ideological process' that scholars have maintained through its continued discussion (2000: 8).

As a socio-cultural construct, the concept of *religion* has arguably been viewed as a dichotomous one wherein all-things supposedly *sacred* are viewed as separate to all-things supposedly *profane* with further Western-centric definitions of what constitutes sacred or otherwise (McCutcheon, 2003). Furthermore, it has been argued that such dichotomous thought has been shaped by a concept synonymous with patterns of *belief* and, in particular, 'belief in a supreme being' (King, 2005: 7693). Had the notion of *religion* remained so constrained, it would have been easy to argue that there is little justification in treating such a notion as a valid area of academic study since it simply reflects a Western mind-set. Such a mind-set says little about *religiosity* per se, that is, the impulse to think and behave in a way that distinguishes it from other ways of being and acting. However, a definitional shift from doctrinal to experiential, as espoused by William James (1985 [1902]), arguably throws open the debate. James argued that 'religious awe is the same organic thrill which we feel in a forest at twilight' (*ibid*: 27). In other words, *religion* as a personal experience has something to say about the human condition in terms of inner motivating factors. Cox has argued that phenomenology, that is, the study of first-hand points of view, is the only means of providing a 'distinct methodology' for the study of religion as something '*sui generis*' (2006: 4).

An inter-disciplinary approach, on the other hand, arguably supports the validity of religious studies when cultural context is taken into account. However, the question remains: what is its core essence if *religion* can only be discussed within the

parameters of psychology, philosophy, anthropology and other established fields of enquiry. Carl Olsen questions the ability to 'distinguish religion (or a religion) from everything else' (2006: 263). He also raises the issue of insider-outsider perspectives, that is, the extent to which scholars are able to remain impartial and objective with regards to cross-cultural and / or comparative studies of religion. From post-Enlightenment thought through to modern-day scholarship, Olsen argues that the notion of *religion* has pre-occupied scholars across disciplines in terms of their attempt to define its essential nature. Citing the work of Wilfred Cantwell Smith, he argues that the term *religion* has changed meaning during the course of its history such that it has become 'intellectualised' and 'associated with Western religious polemics and apologetics' (*ibid*: 267). This brings the argument back to the notion of *religion* being primarily a Western concern and, as such, again challenges its validity as a subject of academic study.

If McCutcheon's standpoint is to be taken seriously, *religion* as a valid area of academic study is arguably on dodgy territory. In a review of McCutcheon's work, Kocku Von Stuckrad comments on the exposure of a 'hidden agenda' in religious studies, that is, by having '[singled] something out as 'religion' scholars partake in a normalising discourse with significant political implications' (2004: 216). However, McCutcheon himself describes the study of *religion* as 'a fascinating yet all-too-human socio-cognitive activity' that utilises the language of "the sacred" to perpetuate a conceptual notion that is still barely identifiable (2003: xv). Despite McCutcheon calling into question economic and geo-political agendas that underpin this field of enquiry, he does not seem to be saying that *religion* as an area of academic study is necessarily invalid. The study of *religiosity* in all its forms, from the traditional rituals of Abrahamic faiths to the hands-on practices of Reiki Healing to scientific empiricism, arguably has something to say about humanity's pre-occupation with *meaning* (Geertz, 1973). However, as current debates reinforce the notion of *religion* as a Western concept that merely labels 'a wide variety of human ideas and behaviour', (Melvaer & Stausberg, 2013: 9), the argument for studies in a distinct category of ideas and behaviours appears to be losing its hold.

Conclusion

As this essay demonstrates, the extent to which *religion* can justifiably be treated as an area of academic study involves, in the first instance, an understanding of terminology. However, *religion* as a concept is difficult to pin down and definitions are widely contested. As a category of human thought and practice, it nevertheless continues to be a focus of study across disciplines. As a distinct category, however, its days may be numbered as scholars such as Fitzgerald call for studies of *religion* to 'be rethought and reconceptualised' (2000: 10). Whilst Fitzgerald's argument for *religion* to be subsumed into the category of cultural studies may successfully de-privilege its status, research methodologies that rely on empirical knowledge-building could lose sight of *religiosity* as a deeply-personal phenomenon. Taking a step back from convoluted intellectual arguments, *religion* as a category of human behaviour may be viewed as an intangible meaning-making endeavour whose categorisation is simply a question of semantics. In the end, the study of *religion* exposes a fundamental quest in academia to understand the human condition. Fitzgerald's call for self-awareness and 'critical reflexivity' is arguably essential if this area of scholarship is to further genuine understanding (2000: 43).

1,253 words (excluding main title)

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